

TOPIC



Choose a noteworthy African-American figure, past or present, who embodies the ideals espoused by American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Describe the person's life and importance and why you think he or she/exemplifies Dr. King's ideals.

'Yes, if you want to say I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all the other shallow things will not matter.... I just want to leave a committed life behind.'

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 'The Drum Major Instinct'. February 4, 1968

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In 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' But slaves had no access to these freedoms because laws kept 'blacks and whites' apart and segregated. Brought over to North America by force, made to work on plantations and deprived of all liberties, the 'Negro' was dominated by a social system that did not allow these privileges.

However, after World War II in 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled that blacks could go to the same schools but in reality, little change really took place. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many like him then were the product of a system that had brought the 'Negro' to such a low point, that they fought to bring to their people all that was written in the Declaration of Independence and to which they felt entitled. While taking a different approach, Dr. William Edward Burghardt DuBois espoused many of the principles that guided the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They both aimed in their own way to fight a battle that eventually resulted in the uplifting of the rights of the African-American and an opportunity to build dignity of self and harness education as a tool to improve the plight of the black man in a white dominated society.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929 and was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968. He was 39 years old. He was a very intelligent student, excelling academically, and attended Morehouse College

graduating with a B.A. degree in Sociology in 1948. In that same year, he entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and while there, also studied at the University of Pennsylvania. He was a shining example of focus and dedication and won awards for his outstanding performance. He was awarded a Bachelor of Divinity in 1951. He also studied at Harvard University receiving his PhD in Theology on June 5, 1955.

During the years 1955-1968, Dr. King focused on the plight of the African-American. He addressed many issues related to the Civil Rights Movement most of all centering on the liberty of human beings and also stressing the value and power of education. He opted for the non-violent approach to confrontation. In 1947, he wrote in the Morehouse College student paper, 'The Maroon Tiger' that "Most of the 'brethren' think that education should equip them with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses. Education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society, the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life.... must train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking.... Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal and the facts from the fiction.'

On the other side of the spectrum but equally committed to the Civil Rights of the African-American, Dr. William Edward Burghardt DuBois was born in 1868 in Massachusetts and died in 1963 in Accra, Ghana. He was an intellectual leader, not as charismatic as Dr. King, but equally committed to the ideal of standing up for the civil rights and liberties of the African-American. He was also a sociologist, historian, Pan-Africanist, author and editor. He too attended Harvard earning a PhD in History, the first ever African-American to earn a PhD at Harvard. He was older than Dr. King and therefore would have experienced a longer period of discrimination for most of his life. His achievements as an academic were truly amazing considering the times in which he lived. While a youth in Massachusetts with few African-Americans in his hometown, he obtained a scholarship along with support from family and friends to Fisk College in Nashville, Tennessee where he experienced the realities of racial discrimination. He would have been a gifted student. He also spent two summers teaching in a country school and learned about the difficulties that his Southern brothers were facing: from poverty, and the blindness of ignorance and prejudice. He had the opportunity to go to Berlin where he consolidated his views on the status of the African and the African-American. He espoused the values of dignity and civil liberties and in his writings sought to explain the rationale for the behavior of the African-American. In 'The Philadelphia Negro; A Social Study,' he published a paper describing, 'The Negro group as a symptom, not a cause; as a striving, palpitating group and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long historic development and not a transient occurrence.'

He eventually moved to Atlanta where he continued studies in the sociology of the Negro – ‘their morality, urbanization, business, college-bred, church and crime’.

He was pivotal in the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) and became the Association’s Director of Research and Editor of its magazine ‘The Crisis’. In this way, he exerted a lot of power among middle class African-Americans and progressive whites from 1910 and 1934. He was a voice for his people.

After leaving the NAACP in 1934, he returned to Atlanta where he spent the next ten years. He produced a vast amount of works of scholarship dedicated to issues that he tried to reconcile all his life. He tried to use his research to help social reform for the African-American. His studies created an understanding of the African-American psyche, which are still used today. His scholarship on ‘Black Reconstruction’ which dealt with the socio-economic development of the United States after the Civil War and the ‘Dusk of Dawn’ which addressed the African and African-American’s search for freedom.

He returned to the NAACP for a short period from 1944-1948. The last years of his life left him unhappy with the society in which he lived and he moved to Ghana, Accra to live out his final days. Unlike Dr. Martin Luther King who was killed in the prime of his life and at the height of his popularity, Dr. DuBois died in his old age.

Both men sought to return the dignity of spirit and pride to the African-American in their own way. While at times Dr. DuBois was labeled a radical figure because of his views, Dr. King wrote 'history cannot ignore WEB DuBois because history has to reflect truth and Dr. DuBois was a tireless explorer and a gifted discoverer of social truths. His singular greatness lay in his quest for truth about his own people. There were very few scholars who concerned themselves with honest study of the black man and he sought to fill this immense void. The degree to which he succeeded disclosed the great dimensions of the man'.

Ironically, Dr. DuBois died the day before the great march on Washington in 1963 when Dr. King delivered his famous speech :I have a dream' where he said that 'one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.' Dr. DuBois, in the final analysis, had as his aim to improve the quality of life for the African-Americans, as did Dr. King. They both might have taken different routes but their objectives were the same, the betterment of the quality of life for their people, where they could walk with pride and dignity.

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